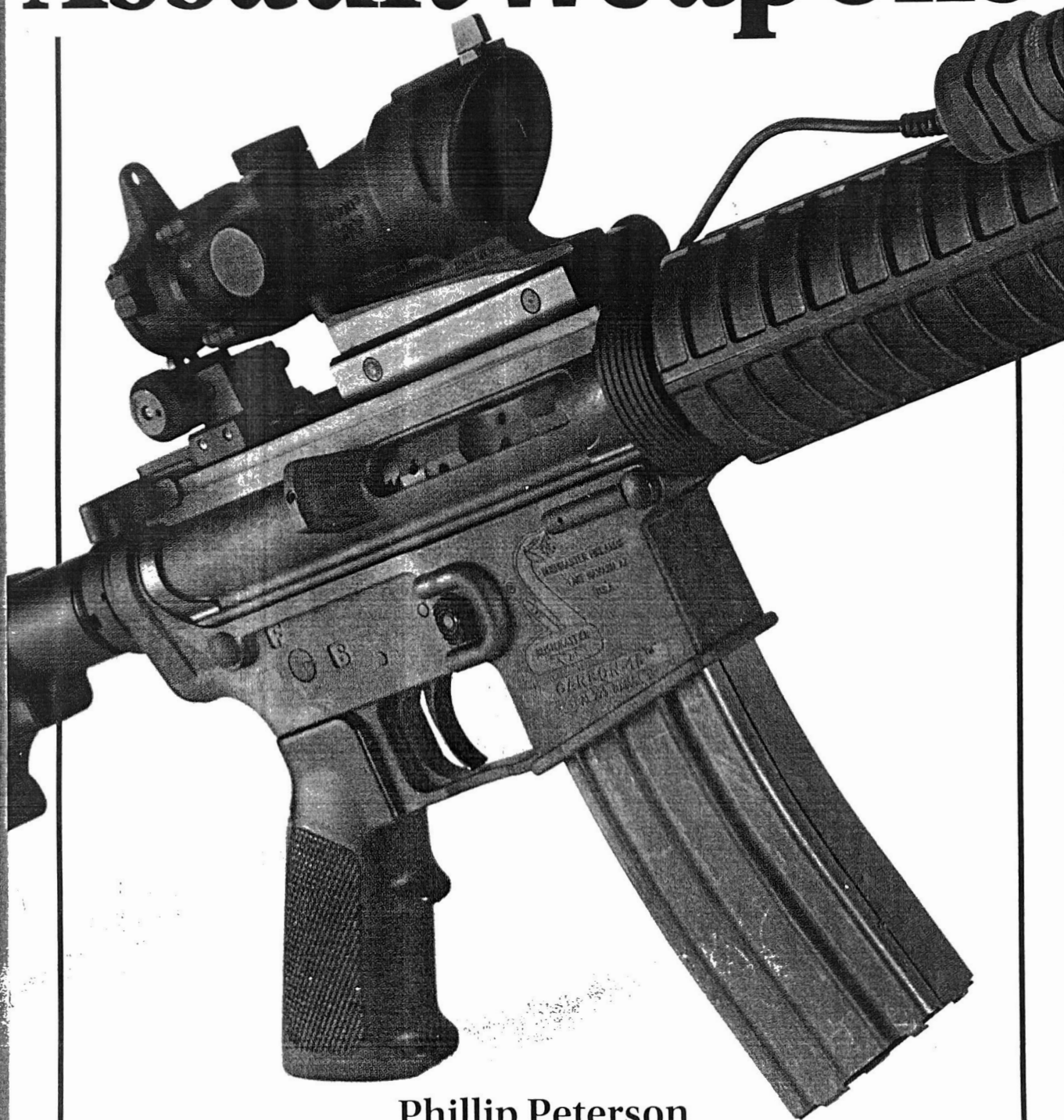


GUN DIGEST®

Buyer's Guide to Assault Weapons



Phillip Peterson
EXHIBIT F (Klarevas)

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Designed by Marilyn McGrane

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Introduction:

What's in a Name?

Assault Weapon.

Those words, on the cover of this book, are probably what drew you to pick it up. "Assault weapon" is a term that causes arguments within the pro-gun community. Any use of the terms "assault weapon" or "assault rifle" by media or politicians is attacked by some pro-gun writers, organizations and many firearm owners. Long wordy debates take place on internet message boards arguing the definitions and usage of terms.

Why is that?

The main reason seems to be that the term has gained use by the anti-gun movement and media. Whenever a crime is committed with a semi-automatic military pattern firearm, the mainstream media will quickly jump in with headlines like "assault weapon used in killing spree" or "drug sweep nets assault weapons." The only time many in the non-gun owning public are exposed to this class of firearms is through negative media exposure.

If you use the historically applied terminology, an assault weapon must be capable of full-automatic fire, i.e., a machine gun. The term assault rifle had its beginning with the Germans during WWII and was applied to a new class of firearm: the "SturmGewehr," or storm rifle, properly known as the MP-44.

This is generally considered to be the first true assault rifle. It was a select-fire rifle that used an intermediate-sized rifle cartridge called the 8x33mm Kurz (short).

The intermediate cartridge concept helps define an assault rifle in military circles. The intermediate cartridge is smaller than the rifle cartridges used in belt-fed machine guns and larger than the pistol cartridges used in submachine guns. Intermediate cartridges are what many semi-automatic assault weapons chamber. These include the 5.56mm (.223), 7.62x51mm (.308), 7.62x39mm, and 5.54x39mm.

What is an assault weapon? If one were to use a strict definition, it could be ANY object that is used against another individual to cause bodily harm. That can be a firearm, a rock or a feather poked in the eye. The military definition was discussed in the last paragraph. In the context of this book, however, "assault weapon" refers to a semi-automatic firearm that accepts high capacity magazines (10+ rounds) and is patterned after military issue select-fire weapons. This can mean an exact copy of an existing design, minus the components that allow full-automatic fire. Or it can be a new design that utilizes similar characteristics.

The popularly-held idea that the term "assault weapon" originated with anti-gun activists, media or politicians is wrong. The term was first adopted by the manufacturers, wholesalers, importers and dealers in the American firearms industry to stimulate sales of certain firearms that did not have an appearance that was familiar to many firearm owners. The manufacturers and gun writers of the day needed a catchy name to identify this new type of gun.

The fact that some of the semi-automatic versions of the military-style firearms retained their bayonet lugs, extended pistol grips, high capacity magazines, folding stocks and even threading for muzzle brakes and grenade launchers has been used to erroneously define "assault weapons." But these design features were part of the attraction to this kind of firearm. All of these features are merely cosmetic and there is little if any evidence that their inclusion on a gun has been essential to some specific criminal use.

Look in many 1980s-era editions of *Gun Digest* and you will find listings of several makes and models of guns that were categorized as assault rifles or assault pistols. There were also some issues of a magazine called *The Complete Book of Assault Rifles* published in the 1980s. *Guns & Ammo* magazine published at least one issue of a magazine with the title *Assault Rifles: The New Breed of Sporting Arm*. And the truth is that many gun owners have used and still use the term in everyday conversations about firearms.

Some alternate monikers suggested by the never-call-them-assault-weapons crowd include paramilitary firearms, military pattern semi-automatics, homeland defense rifles, tactical firearms, sports



utility rifles, EBRs (Evil Black Rifles), or simply firearms. I tend to favor the term neat guns, but that could be just about any gun. There needs to be a commonly understood name for this type of firearm that does not require a drawn out definition. It really should not be that complicated.

Whatever arguments can be made about what terminology to use, the name assault weapon has been defined by law with the passage of several state and local AW laws and by the Federal Assault Weapon Ban, also known as the Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. This law, and most of the others, regulate these firearms by model name and characteristics. (See the chapter on legal issues to read the exact wording of the currently expired Federal AW law.) By using the term "assault weapon" throughout the text of the law, they have forever added this name to the American dictionary.